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ABSTRACT

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Parent Involvement in Unusually Successful Compensatory Education

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Abstract

Parent involvement activities from 116 unusually successful Chapter 1 projects for educationally disadvantaged students were evaluated. The activities were found to be similar to activities in earlier projects under Title 1, and generally initiated by the school. Common activities included parent committees, parent-teacher interaction opportunities and workshops demonstrating instructional activities that can be used at home. Experts and researchers in the field of parent involvement advocate home reinforcement of school learning, where parents are trained to supplement school work at home, monitor and encourage their children's learning. Although it cannot be said that successful Chapter 1 projects overlook this type, it surely seems under emphasized. This is probably more due to lack of information of what and how to implement than a contrary philosophy or unwillingness to implement home reinforcement strategies by teachers.

Parent Involvement in Unusually Successful Compensatory Education

Most compensatory education programs in the U.S. include parent participation in program planning, implementation, or evaluation, but few require parent involvement in instruction. Soon after its inception ESEA Title I (now ECIA Chapter 1), school officials were required to work with community groups and later parent advisory councils (U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1973). The extent to which parent involvement has an impact on children is unclear (Fullan, 1982). It may be that they have very little direct effect on the decision making process in the program and thereby little effect on their children (Paddock, 1979). However, the potential role that parents play in their children's cognitive development and school achievement is well established (Scott-Jones, 1984).

Parent involvement in instruction (e.g., parents as tutors, paid aides, frequent visitors to the classroom, or participants in home-based reinforcement of school behavior) seems to be related to student learning (Armor et al. 1976; Melargno et al. 1981). However, are these the better forms of parent involvement for disadvantaged students? Rich et al. (1979) identified seven components of successful school-family programs.

The impact that parents could have on their children's learning has intuitive appeal. Parents can provide good models for reading habits, initiate and facilitate discussion of ideas and issues, encourge positive attitude toward learning and education, provide an environment appropriate for study, reinforce learning from the classroom, monitor homework and recognize successes in school. Although direct evidence from the research literature is modest, positive effects on student learning would be expected from parent effort.

A theoretical rationale to support parent involvement (excluding the affective and motivational role) is rooted in academic engaged time (frequently referred to as time-on-task). Parents can provide reinforcement of learning tasks at home, thus increasing the engagement rate of their children.

Theory and intuition aside, it is the teacher who ultimately uses parent involvement or for that matter any other teaching strategy. Thus, how teachers view the importance and practicality of parents taking part in schooling is particularly useful information. Such a descriptive study was done by Becker and Epstein (1982). They surveyed nearly 3700 public elementary teachers in over 600 school in 16 of the 24 district in Maryland. The response rate was 73 percent for 15 of the 16 districts and 35 percent for the remaining district. The authors state that the teachers represented the state's teacher population. The study also included the results of a brief survey of over 600 elementary school principals.

The Becker and Epstein survey focused on 14 parent-involvement strategies, teachers beliefs in those strategies and how they use the strategies. The authors begin with the premise that "of all the strategies of parental supervision, learning at home may be the most educationally significant (p. 108)." The fourteen techniques studied were specific to parent involvement with their children at home. Classroom visitation, chaperoning school activities, attending planning meetings, workshops and parent-teacher conferences were not addressed by the survey. The authors grouped the 14 items, corresponding to the 14 techniques, into five categories. The categories are summarized as follows:

1. Encouraging reading at home, listening to children read,
2. Encouraging discussions between parent and child,
3. Specifying certain informal activities at home to stimulate learning,
4. Contracts between parent and teacher to help the student at home,
5. Parent training to tutor or evaluate students.

Becker and Epstein conclude by questioning "whether the familiar rituals of visit-school night and parental conferences accomplish more than polite exchange between parents and teachers (p. 113)." They raise this question without providing any direct evidence in its support. Becker and Epstein reported that a large majority of teachers would not dismiss parent involvement as a solution to major school problems. However, their wording of the item did not address the magnitude of importance that the teachers placed upon parent involvement nor the specific kind of involvement. They also found a large majority of teachers who believed that parents make a greater effort to help their children at home when the parents regularly spend time in the classroom.

Techniques related to reading with children or listening to children's oral reading were supported by most teachers from among the 14 categories of parent involvement surveyed. The Chapter 1 (formerly Title I) compensatory education program serves educationally disadvantaged children and has the largest parent involvement component of any federally sponsored program. Epstein and Becker (1982), as part of the same teacher survey, reported contrasting opinions from Title I teachers about the benefits of parent involvement.

A review of studies of compensatory education programs revealed that parents were involved in the projects in four general patterns of participation (Nebgen, 1979). Parents participated as observers or learners through parent education classes, open houses and small group discussion sessions. Parents participated in general school activities through clerical tasks, school beautification projects and helping on field rips. Parents chose to be volunteers in the classroom, or tutors for individuals or small groups. Finally, parents participated by working on school advisory committees.

Becker and Epstein (1982) found contrasting views about the benefits of parent involvement from Title I teachers. A majority of teachers in the survey believed that parent invlovement (particularly at home) could be important to education, but were either uncomfortable developing such programs or were skeptical of their success. Because of the long-standing commitment to parent involvement among Chapter 1 programs, descriptions of how parents participate in exemplary Chapter 1 programs would be useful for several reasons:

1. Provide teachers with ideas for parent involvement,
2. Describe the frequency with which various activities occur exemplary projects,
3. Informally compare Chapter 1 parent activities with Title I,
4. Compare Chapter 1 parent involvement activities with those advocated to develop a school-family relationship.

Methods

In Novemeber 1984, the U.S. Department of Education launched a national effort to identify Chapter 1 projects that are unusually successful in meeting the special needs of disadvantaged students. Projects were nominated by Chief State School Officers in the fifty states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico on the basis of annual achievement gains that exceeded state or national averages. Twelve panels of experts were established to review the nomination forms. The panels considered 13 program characteristics that were derived from teacher and school effectiveness research, and four achievement

indicators. The nominees responded to structured questions for all 13 and then indicated which attributes contributed most to their project success. The review panel members rated the nomination applications individually, then met in groups to discuss and rate the applications collectively. The nominations of the selected projects were sent to us for further review, summary and development into project profiles and summary of research on effective compensatory education (Griswold, Cotton and Hansen, 1986).

The types of parent involvement activities and their frequency were recorded. Major categories were formed and under each category the type of activity and its relative frequency were placed.

Results

Among the 333 total state nominations, the national panels selected 116 as being unusually successful. These exemplary projects tended to be of moderate size. Approximately 42% served 100-499 students. Slightly fewer (35%) served 500-2500 students. The smallest (less than 100 students) and the largest (greater than 2500 students) size projects had the least representation, 15% and 8% respectively. Reading was the predominant curriculum (81%), followed by mathematics (50%), then language arts (21%). Note that they do not total 100%, because many projects had multiple subject areas as their curriculum focus. The characteristics of success that appeared most often were:

1) appropriate instructional materials, methods, and approaches,
2) coordination with the regular school program and other special programs, and
3) parent and/or community involvement.

The most common form of parent involvement was a parent advisory council (PAC) or similar committee structure. Sixty one percent of the projects had an active PAC. The activities of the PAC include program planning, surveying parent needs for the project, implementation and evaluation of program objectives. The PAC held regularly scheduled meetings, developed newsletters, stimulated publicity and coordinated special projects and events.

Another popular form of parent involvement was parent training. Chapter 1 staff trained parents in order for them to provide specific instruction or instructionally-related activities to students (their's or other's) at home or in the classroom. Six general types of this activity were identified (their relative frequency is enclosed in parentheses). Parents were trained to be coaches or tutors in the classroom for individual or small groups of students (27%). Instruction was provided to parents in making activities or games so as to reinforce learning at home (25%). Parents were taught how to help with reading lessons at home, to emphasize reading orally, to review reading and place their signature on the assignment, and to select books from a reading list (19%).

Some projects provided training in parenting skills and in understanding of student behaviors learned in the classroom (12%). The least popular activities under this category of home reinforcement training were monitoring homework, providing input on homework and/or stimulating discussions at home (7%).

Personal contact between teachers or other staff and parents was a common form of parent participation. Parent-teacher conferences, telephone calls, written notes (e.g., happy-grams) and regular progress reports were frequent (30%). Home visitation by a community worker, parent liason or teacher was found in 19 percent of the projects. Monthly group meetings and discussions with the teacher were reported among a few projects (6%).

General workshops to present suggestions for good study techniques, to demonstrate example lessons and to discuss curriculum and objectives were other features of parent involvement (17%).

Other activities were found to occur at a similar relative frequency: 1) generalized encouragement to volunteer for classroom work, to make material for use at home and to help with homework (16%), 2) classroom visitation and observation (18%), 3) open houses, socials (e.g., teas, potluck suppers, movies). Instructional materials were sent home to parents. They typically included summer educational activities (8%), calendars of instructional activities (3%), and activity sheets (1%). Minimal instructions accompanied these activities.

Money making activities were not too popular (3%). They were designed (like the socials) to make parents feel more comfortable at school and to be involved indirectly in learning through book swaps, reading carnivals, book sales and raffles.

Parent resource centers were reported in eight percent of the projects. The centers were sometimes libraries or material banks where books, instructional material, and even childrens clothes were available.

A family counseling service to deal with parent-child problems was available in a few projects (3%).

Discussion and Conclusions

Among 116 unusually effective Chapter 1 projects nationwide, a wide range of examples of parent involvement as reported. School and district advisory committees, training of parents by teachers in the projects, personal contacts between parent and teacher were the more common forms. Classroom visitation, general awareness level workshops, social activities and encouragement to volunteer and help with homework were other frequent activities. Open houses, parent resource centers and family counseling attest to the diversity of activities, even though these activities occured less often.

Parent involvement in pre-1982 national compensatory education (Title I) appears to be only slightly different than current Chapter 1 programs. Recall that Nebgen described parent involvement within Title I programs according to four categories: 1) parents as observers and/or learners, 2) participation as support staff for clerical and chaperoning tasks, 3) voluteer work in the classroom and 4) participation on school or district advisory committees.

Given that the activities are from unusually effective projects, it is somewhat surprising to find very little difference in parent involvement after seven years of continuous program implementation amid considerable public and academic dicussion of the importance of parent involvement. For example, Rich et al. (1979), from the Home-school Institute advocate seven elements of successful school-family programs. The seven are summarized as follows: 1) parents must view their participation as directly linked to their children's achievement, 2) home-based reinforcement of academic skills is essential, 3) various modes of parent participation should be available, 4) involvement opportunities should be available at all grade levels, 5) involvement should go beyond funded programs to extend to all parents, 6) school boards, community organizations, and professional organizations need to be involved, and 7) parent/community involvement should be a legitimate school activity and should be communicated as such.

Furthermore, Epstein and Becker (1982) concluded from their survey of teacher perceptions of parent involvement that "of all the types of parent involvement supervison of learning actvities at home may be the most educationally significant (p. 111)." They also question "whether the familiar rituals of visit-school night and parent conferences accomplish more than polite exchange between parents and teachers (p. 113)."

Thus, while researchers advocate home reinforcement of learning as the most effective form of parent involvement and do not consider parent nights and parent/teacher conferences as useful, even the more effective Chapter 1 projects have quite the opposite emphasis in their parent involvement. Projects emphasize personal contacts between teacher and parent than facilitating parents' reinforcement of student learning

at home. Several factors may contribute to the current state of affairs. Projects may not be familiar with the literature providing support for the home reinforcement and rely on the traditional parent involvement roles typical of Chapter 1. They may not have time to implement new parent involvement strategies, they may be skeptical of parent involvement, or they may feel poorly prepared to implement a home-reinforcement strategy.

Before Chapter 1 projects decide to consider more home reinforcement of learning, they need more information on parent involvement. Access to research on the topic and to examples of successful implementation is a reasonable first step. This is the step the U. S. Department of Education chose by disseminating information about parent involvement (and other characteristics of effective educational practices) through a two volume resource book and regional training conferences. Effectiveness of home reinforcement and other parent involvement strategies in improving achievement, and dissemination of the results for practical procedures to hasten implementation of more parent involvement awaits further action.

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